

By Rabbi Stuart Halpern

February 16, 2021

The Enduring Story of Esther in America



Queen Esther Approaching the Palace of Ahasuerus (Purchase, The Annenberg Foundation Gift, 1997/Metropolitan Museum of Art/Wikimedia Commons)

For Jonathan Kirsch's book review of Rabbi Stuart Halpern's "Esther in America," click [here](#).

Before masking and social distancing came to America, they dwelled in ancient Shushan. As the megillah of Esther recounts, the Jews in the kingdom of King Ahasuerus were both part of and apart from the wider society. They were active and contributing residents of the public square who nonetheless lived at constant risk of prejudice and antagonism by those who were unaccepting of their unique beliefs and practices. With their Jewish identities partially obscured, Queen Esther and her cousin Mordecai had to navigate a path of connection to their

fellow citizens amidst a fraught and dangerous time.

By Rabbi Stuart Halpern

February 16, 2021
Although, of course, the Jews in the time of Esther faced a different kind of annihilation — not from an unseen virus but from Ahasuerus' advisor Haman's genocidal intent — the tensions that Mordecai and Esther withstood are not unlike our own. Their story of courageously saving their people by taking pride in their identity while remaining loyal to their country has long inspired Jewish Americans and the United States as a whole.

Americans have long found in Esther a model for how to navigate questions of recognition and pluralism. Roger Williams, the seventeenth-century Puritan minister and founder of Rhode Island, saw in Ahasuerus' eventual tolerance of Jews as a model of religious freedom that should be replicated in America. "Liberty of conscience" was a principle which Williams himself helped popularize.

And in 1825, Mordecai Manuel Noah tried, like the biblical Mordecai, to ensure the survival and flourishing of his people. A proud American, a renowned playwright, sheriff and one-time U.S. ambassador, Manuel Noah believed that a secure Jewish people would benefit the American project. He therefore purchased Grand Island in upstate New York, hoping that it would serve as a homeland to the Jews and a means of ensuring their protection from anti-Semitism. From this homeland-in-exile, the Jews could contribute to the economic, religious and societal development of their fellow citizens. Noah's plan did not come to fruition, despite an elaborate ceremonial launch

and a public campaign. Yet his struggle to ensure the protection of his people in an era in which dwelling securely in the land of Israel was not an option mirrors that of his ancient namesake.

February 16, 2021

Both Mordecais felt a responsibility to balance national and tribal loyalties while living in the diaspora, believing firmly that one loyalty enhanced the other.

In the early twentieth century, Esther again served as a prism for Jewish acceptance. As the LA Times reported in 1915, at the largest open-air event of its kind in Selig (now Luna) Park in Los Angeles, a cast of over 100 presented the “Pageant of the World’s Birth,” a dramatic spectacle depicting six biblical scenes, including “Queen Esther in her glory,” organized by the Roosevelt Auxiliary to benefit United Spanish War Veterans.

In response to the launch of the Miss America beauty pageants founded in Atlantic City in 1921, Jews launched high-profile “Queen Esther” contests, sponsored by the Jewish National Workers’ Alliance to celebrate Jewish beauty. Thus, on Purim in 1933, Katherine Spector was crowned “Prettiest U.S. Jewess” in front of 22,000 people in Manhattan’s Madison Square Garden. These initiatives, an amalgam of civic pride, self-preservation and tolerance, were yet another echo of Esther.

The modern era continues to see deep interest in the heroes, and even minor characters, of the Purim story. Books like “The Cry of Mordecai: Awakening An Esther Generation in a Haman Age” by the evangelical leader Bishop Robert Stearns sit alongside renowned Jewish educator Dr. Erica Brown’s “Esther: Power, Fate, and Fragility in Exile.” They join the recent

children's book "Queen Vashti's Comfy Pants" and the novel "The Book of V," both of which portray Vashti, the queen who Anasuerus deposed before he married Esther, as an early feminist heroine. Gal Gadot's portrayal of Wonder Woman has drawn comparisons to Esther in her navigation of questions of identity and belonging.

THE MODERN ERA CONTINUES TO SEE DEEP INTEREST IN THE HEROES OF THE PURIM STORY.

In another year in which we must wear masks on Purim — not as costumes but as protective measures — and in a year in which tensions of religious liberty, anti-Semitism and toleration have been ever-present, we turn, once again, to Esther's story. In 2021, Esther reminds us that a society can only flourish if it allows others to wear their identities proudly. It reminds us that tribal loyalty can enhance loyalty to one's home country. And it reminds us that to provide redemption, all it takes is the courageous moral actions of individuals.

Purim Sameach.

Rabbi Dr. Stuart Halpern is the Senior Advisor to the Provost and Senior Program Officer of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought at Yeshiva University, and the editor of "Esther in America" (Maggid Books)

Advertisement



By Rabbi Stuart Halpern

February 16, 2021